DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 029 CS 509 089

AUTHOR Zhang, Hong; Alex, Nola Kortner

TITLE Oral Language Development across the Curriculum, K-12. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CS-95-10
PUB DATE 95
CONTRACT RR93002011
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; Language Acquisition; *Language Skills; *Oral Language; Skill Development; Speech Communication; *Student Needs; *Teacher Role; *Verbal Learning
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Oral Communication across the Curriculum; Oral Learning; *Speaking across the Curriculum

ABSTRACT

Noting that speech is not simply basic communication, this digest discusses ways in which teachers can help children develop oral language proficiency. The digest holds that speech involves thinking, knowledge, and skills, and that it requires practice and training. After setting out three criteria for oral language competence--fluency, clarity, and sensitivity--the digest suggests that oral language development has largely been ignored in the classroom. It points out that oral language provides a foundation for the development of other language skills and that the literacy process actually begins with speaking. The digest sees the teacher's role as that of a facilitator of the learning process and offers suggestions for instructional strategies. (Contains 10 references.) (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ERIC Digest

Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication EDO-CS-93-10

ndiana University
2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150
D107
Bloomington, IN 47408-2698
(812) 855-5847; (800) 759-4723

ED 389 029

Oral Language Development across the Curriculum, K-12

by Zhang Hong and Nola Kortner Aiex

At the most basic level, oral language means communicating with other people. But when we talk about oral language development across the curriculum, we do not mean teaching children to speak as much as we mean improving their ability to talk or communicate more effectively. Speech is not usually simply basic communication—it involves thinking, knowledge, and skills. It also requires practice and training. How can we help our children to develop oral proficiency? What do we need to do as teachers to facilitate that development? These are the questions we will discuss in this Digest.

Oral language acquisition is a natural process for children. It occurs almost without effort. The ability to speak grows with age, but it does not mean that such growth will automatically lead to perfection. To speak in more effective ways requires particular attention and constant practice. Holbrook (1983) sets out three criteria for oral language competence: fluency, clarity, and sensitivity. To help children achieve these levels of development is our responsibility as educators.

Teacher Role

Many studies have indicated that oral language development has largely been neglected in the classroom (Holbrook, 1983). Most of the time oral language in the classroom is used more by teachers than by students. However, oral language, even as used by the teacher, seldom functions as a means for students to gain knowledge and to explore ideas.

Underlying this fact are two assumptions. One of these assumptions— that the teacher's role is to teach—is usually interpreted to mean that to teach means to talk. Accordingly, teachers spend hours and hours teaching by talking while the children sit listening passively. Such conventional teaching-learning is one of the obstacles preventing the real development of oral language. Children leaving these classrooms tend to carry this passivity over to their learning attitudes, and tend to be "disabled" in their learning abilities, as well.

The second assumption is based on the fact that children start learning and using oral language long before they go to school. Therefore, it is assumed that the primary learning tasks for children in school are reading and writing, which are usually seen as the two major aspects of literacy.

Zhang Hong is a staff member of the Indiana College Placement and Assessment Center, Bloomington. Nola Kortner Aiex is Assistant Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.

In one investigation Stabb (1986) reported a steady decline of the use of oral language in classrooms as a major reason for the inhibition of students' abilities to reason and to forecast as they progressed from lower to higher grades. Such a phenomenon is found not only in the language arts classroom, but also in other classrooms. According to Stabb's and many other researchers' observations, classrooms are dominated by teachers talking and by workbook exercises. Researchers call this phenomenon "teachers-talk-students-listen" or "teacher-dominated." In related research, Willmington (1993) surveyed school administrators who attested to the importance of oral communication skills for teachers—and they considered listening to be the most important skill of all.

Another result of teacher-dominated classrooms is the negative effect upon children's attitudes toward learning. Operating under the two above-mentioned assumptions, teachers often fail to see that literacy learning is a continuum—an ongoing process of learning—for children. Learning before going to school and learning in school are often viewed as separate processes. Oral language, which is the major learning instrument for children before going to school, is no longer available with the onset of formal schooling. Confronted with new tasks of learning to read and write while being deprived of their major learning tool, children tend to feel depressed and frustrated. Learning begins to loom large, and schooling gradually becomes routine—exactly the situation described in Stabb's research.

After a few years students will have become programmed to a kind of passive learning atmosphere—the teacher talks, the students listen and do their homework. Here, learning simply means taking down whatever is given. In this type of classroom environment, students learn the basic skills of reading and writing. However, they will not learn how to think critically and how to make sound judgments on their own.

Stabb (1986) speculates that we teachers often become "so involved with establishing routine, finishing the textbook, covering curriculum, and preparing students for standardized tests that we have forgotten one of our original goals, that of stimulating thought." Though Stabb's speculation sounds critical, she does provide us with a thought-provoking expansion of the relationship between oral language development and thinking abilities development. In delineating a debate program for elementary school students, Aiex (1990) notes that, although the focus of the program is on the development of oral communication skills, critical thinking and reasoning abilities are also developed along the way.

CS509087

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Oral Language as Foundation

From the preceding, we can see that oral language is indeed an important link in the process of children's learning and thinking development. It is not merely a language issue; it is also an intellectual issue which deserves serious attention from both teachers and researchers. From the perspective of language development, oral language provides a foundation for the development of other language skills. For most children, the literacy learning process actually begins with speaking—talking about their experiences, talking about themselves. It is through speech that children learn to organize their thinking and focus their ideas (Lyle, 1993). The neglect of oral language in the classroom will destroy that foundation and severely hinder the development of other aspects of language skills.

Research on Cognitive Development

Current research literature on critical thinking and cognitive development indicates that the development of language has a close relationship to the development of thinking abilities (Berry, 1985; Gambell, 1988). This is especially true for elementary-level students. Before achieving proficiency in reading and writing—and even after proficiency in reading and writing have been achieved—oral language is one of the important means of learning and of acquiring knowledge (Lemke, 1989). Throughout life, oral language skills remain essential for engagement in intellectual dialogue, and for the communication of ideas.

Teacher as Facilitator

Given this understanding of the importance of oral language skills, we should reflect on our attitudes toward the teaching-learning relationship. First of all, we need to overcome the faulty assumptions mentioned before. As teachers, we should not assume the role of authoritarian knowledge giver. Instead, we should see ourselves as friendly and interested facilitators of student learning. In emphasizing the role of oral language in the classroom, we are by no means implying that the teacher's role is not important; on the contrary, we present a more demanding task for teachers. To facilitate a learning process in which children are given both opportunity and encouragement to speak and to explore their own thinking, the teacher has to do more than tell children what he or she means, or what the text means. Instead, the teacher has several different roles to play.

The teacher can encourage students to bring their ideas and background knowledge into class learning activities. To achieve this goal, the teacher must be a good and responsive listener to children's talk. Facilitation of a child's talking in class is not enough for language teaching, however, but only provides an environment conducive to both teaching and learning. At this point, the teacher can raise questions concerning the content of the class or the text. While maintaining the role of a knowing arbiter, the teacher still needs to persuade the students. Here one point should be emphasized—implementation of oral language development across the curriculum requires teamwork. All content-area teachers have to be actively involved in this task. The goal is not only to get children to speak, but also to have them learn and develop through speech.

As the children's other language skills develop in the course of time, classroom talk can be directed more towards the goals of exploring ideas found in texts and sharpening thoughts. "Speaking to learn" is the vehicle for increasing and deepening knowledge.

Two publications recommended as resource guides for classroom teachers are "Guidelines for Developing Oral Communication Curricula in Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade" and "Listening and Speaking in the English Language Arts Curricula K-12."

References

Aiex, Nola Kortner (1990). "Debate and Communication Skills." ERIC *Digest*. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication. [ED 321 334]

Berry, Kathleen S. (1985). "Talking to Learn Subject Matter/Learning Subject Matter Talk." *Language Arts*, 62(1), 34-42. [EJ 309 762]

Gambell, Trevor J. (1988). "Linguistics and Literacy Teaching." Paper presented at the World Conference of Applied Linguistics (Sydney, Australia). [ED 299 816]

Guidelines for Developing Oral Communication Curricula in Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade (1991). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association. [ED 337 828]

Holbrook, Hilary Taylor (1983). "ERIC/RCS Report: Oral Language: A Neglected Language Art?" *Language Arts*, 60(2), 255-58. [EJ 276 124]

Lemke, J. L. (1989). "Making Text Talk." *Theory-into-Practice*, 28(2), 136-41. [EJ 415 815]

Listening and Speaking in the English Language Arts Curriculum K-12. 1989 Field Test Edition. Albany, NY: New York State Education Department. [ED 335 726]

Lyle, Susan (1993). "An Investigation into Ways in Which Children Talk Themselves into Meaning." *Language and Education*, 7(3), 181-87. [EJ 485 116]

Stabb, Claire (1986). "What Happened to the Sixth Graders: Are Elementary Students Losing Their Need to Forecast and to Reason?" *Reading Psychology*, 7(4), 289-96. [EJ 348 985]

Willmington, S. Clay (1993). "Oral Communication Skills Necessary for Successful Teaching." *Educational Research Quarterly*, 16(2), 5-10. [EJ 480 434]

This publication was prepared with partial funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002011. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.